

In Rhode Island, education has nowhere to turn

By NICK ZAMMARELLI

Once again, another season of budget wrangling has ended, and once again, the state legislature has spoken loud and clear. For all their talk about education being their top priority, we all know what they did to show it.

They level-funded education. This prompted the governor to accuse the General Assembly of taking money out of the pockets of Rhode Island's school children, but before we ready ourselves to do some hand-stands in honor of our so-called education governor, let us not forget that despite his being a former teacher, he will likely go down as the most anti-union governor in state history. So where do we go from here? Let's be honest, had the situation been reversed and the governor nixed a planned three percent increase to education proposed by the general assembly, they'd have done and said the exact same things that the governor is now doing and saying. There was a time when you could not only tell who your enemies were but who your friends

were as well.

Ah, but these are new and different times in this great land of ours, and now, it looks as though there are no real friends to be found here. What proof, you ask? Well in case you need more proof than that which you already have, take a little trip in the way back machine with me, though we'll only be traveling back a couple of years.

On June 1, 2005, a huge rally was held outside the state house in protest of a pension reform bill before the general assembly. This bill would change dramatically the requirements for when teachers could retire and how much we would receive upon said retirement. Back then, we thought we could count on some people at the state house, people we thought understood what we did and the true value of our undertaking.

No such luck. The bill passed by a landslide and anyone who had less than 10 years in the system when it passed was subjected to a new and decidedly unfair method of pension reform. We go on though, doing what we do to the absolute best of our ability, and

why? Because we understand the value

and necessity of turning out not only children with good test scores, but children with good character as well. And while I'll never be a union right or wrong kind of guy, here in Coventry, we stepped up during our last contract negotiation and took a pay freeze for the academic year that just ended because we knew what the year would be like and how difficult it would be.

Those outside of the teaching profession like to throw around the phrase "real world." Well, in my world, my wife, who works in the private sector, receives an annual raise, and well she should. She's an excellent worker deserving of every penny she makes. So are we. So are all who get up each and every day to do the hard work it takes to get packages where they're going, to cook food for those willing to pay for it, to care for those unable to care for themselves and yes, to those who teach the children.

The legislature either forgot this or simply chose to ignore it. I'm going with choice number two here. For it is

not a lack of money that is the problem.

Had education received lottery money as was supposed to be the case, we would be in much better shape indeed. In fact, I propose a joining of union forces in filing a suit in order to get the state to do what it promised: give the lottery money back to education. Hold the state accountable for years of ignoring the needs of our children, all the while demanding better test scores and more accountability from school administrators and teachers.

Note to the general assembly: we are more than willing to meet the challenges before us. You must demonstrate greater willingness to financially support the meeting of those challenges. If you do not, one way or another, we will elect people who will. If you are not among them, then you need not apply. In other words, if you can't cut it, we'll find people who can.

Nick Zammarelli is a Coventry resident and a regular contributor to The Courier. He is a teacher in the Coventry school system.

Coventry

Courier

June 29, 2007

